

# Victorian Studies Association of Ontario



## September 2007

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### **The President's Message**

Welcome everyone to another academic year after what I trust was a restful and productive summer. I have a confession to make: I am enjoying my first full sabbatical, and writing this message on a cruise ship somewhere on the Baltic Sea en route to St. Petersburg, Russia. I was determined to begin my sabbatical as far away from the classroom as was physically possible and I have just about succeeded. By the time you read this however, I will in all likelihood, be back in Canada.

That said, plans for VSAO events are currently underway. These will include at least two evening lectures in Toronto, in the fall and winter terms, and our annual conference and meeting next April 2008. The VSAO is also sponsoring a session at ACCUTE in June 2008. Please see the call for papers in the newsletter (p. 6). Regional events are tentatively scheduled for Ottawa and North Bay in the winter term, and I encourage any VSAO members planning a lecture to contact the executive so that we may put a notice on the VSAO website. Since our meeting in April 2007, we have filled the third member at large position on the executive, and I want to welcome Barbara Leckie, from Carleton University. I

am looking forward to this, our forty-first VSAO year and hope to see you at some of the events.

Sincerely yours,  
Anne

Anne Clendinning at [annec@nipissingu.ca](mailto:annec@nipissingu.ca)

### Upcoming VSAO Events

**VSAO Evening Talk:** VC 304 , Victoria College , University of Toronto on Thursday, October 25, 2007, at 7:30 pm. **Anne Clendinning** will present:

#### **“A Most Disgusting Offensive Liquor”: Urban Pollution and the Victorian Gas Industry**

In a letter to *The Lancet* , the chief medical officer for London , Dr. Letheby, complained that despite existing legislation, the manufacturers of coal gas continued to discharge noxious effluents into public waterways and streams, at great inconvenience to those residents unfortunate enough to live downstream or downwind from a gas works. And yet, despite the industry’s long association with industrial effluents and noxious vapours, coal gas manufacturers and their supporters represented the industry as a smoke-free fuel and the salubrious alternative to burning coal, whose smoke was the great scourge of many Victorian cities. This talk explores that apparent contradiction, and in so doing, seeks to understand Victorian conceptualizations of urban pollution with particular emphasis on the coal gas industry.

Further information and updates on all our events will appear on our website at: [www.ryerson.ca/vsao](http://www.ryerson.ca/vsao).



Beckton Gas Works, Docklands, 1881

## **The Forum: The Boundaries of Victorian Studies**

For this edition of the forum, I asked three contributors to muse on the boundaries – particularly temporal and spatial – that mark out the ‘Victorians’ and the discipline of Victorian Studies. The contributors are, in order, Philippa Levine (Professor, History, University of Southern California), Rachel Buurma (Assistant Professor, English, University of Toronto), and Grace Kehler (Associate Professor, English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University).

We are eager to hear from members about their reactions to the forum discussions, and we have space to print a limited number of such responses. Ideas for forum themes are also welcome. Please send responses and ideas to me at [heaths@mcmaster.ca](mailto:heaths@mcmaster.ca).

Stephen Heathorn

### **A World of Boundaries**

#### **Philippa Levine, University of Southern California**

Martin Hewitt begins his recent essay recuperating the notion of the Victorian with the provocative statement that “Victorian studies has been marked by evasiveness and embarrassment about the chronological limits that define its identity” (395). Whether one goes as far as Hewitt or not, he’s certainly correct in identifying as a problem the boundaries of what can be considered Victorian, a question which is surely as much about the spatial as about the temporal. While we may fret about whether the dates of one monarch’s reign *really* define an era, we quite casually and comfortably describe as Victorian architecture in places where the reach of the British crown was, by the time of Victoria’s accession to the throne, either wholly or increasingly irrelevant. We happily talk about Victorian houses, for example, in many a North American location. Canada was well on its way to self-government by the time Victoria was crowned queen, while the US was a half-century old when this shy young woman gave her name to a new era. In what sense, then, can these buildings – easily identifiable even by a casual observer as nineteenth-century confections – be deemed Victorian? Is it accurate, is it reasonable, is it comprehensible to apply the term Victorian in geographical locations only partially related to the arena where the term originated? I don’t doubt that many of those who lived in Victoria’s Britain would have been supremely comfortable with this generous use of the term. What better example of the spread of their culture than the liberal use of the term Victorian? What better proof of the ascendancy they were so eager to claim and proclaim?

Not that these so-called Victorians were antithetical to boundaries, of course. Indeed one might argue that a defining characteristic of that which we call ‘Victorian’ was a belief in the importance and the soundness of boundaries: between men and women, between rich and poor, between primitive and civilized, between private and public. The Victorians made an

art form out of boundaries, articulating an always unstable but nonetheless potent vision of the world as a series of bounded binaries.

Surely, here, though – at this point of instability – is where we might profitably think today about the boundaries of the Victorian age. After all, much as the Victorians tried to impose boundaries – and they did so strenuously through law, social status, schooling, religion and many other institutions as well as cultural practices – there were always some, indeed many, who ignored or challenged them. People refused to conform, to remain within the boundaries prescribed for them. Feminists clamoured for an extension of women's rights. Workers demanded recognition of the value of their labour. Radicals lived outside the boundaries of sexual propriety. Colonial protesters organised themselves. And so on. In short, there were boundaries, and plenty of them, but there were also plenty of people willing and keen to blur those boundaries and to risk the consequences.

Might we not do something similar, that is, blur the boundaries of what's Victorian, without embarrassment, and even embrace the consequences? And if that means not only describing events prior to 1837 or after 1901 as 'Victorian', but also using that term to describe a non-British architectural style of the nineteenth century, then what of it? I would argue, Hewitt's admonition notwithstanding, that we need feel neither embarrassed nor evasive about the use of a term which, if we follow the example of so many eminent Victorians, can continue to have meaning, value, and potency in a host of arenas.

Martin Hewitt, "Why the Notion of Victorian Britain *Does* Make Sense," *Victorian Studies* 48:3 (Spring 2006).

### **Borders and Boundaries of Victorian Studies**

**Rachel Buurma, University of Toronto**

I tend to think of the Victorians as drawn to, if not obsessed with, the borders and boundaries of (among other things) objects, nations, and selves. They liked to decorate borders and use them as decoration (fringe, mourning paper), expand them (empire), police and transgress them (as in D.A. Miller's work on sexuality and selfhood in *The Novel and the Police*). So as Victorianists, our own interest in borders and boundaries – of both our field and of the era from which it takes its name – seems to be almost an extension of this Victorian interest. We spend a great deal of time thinking about the boundaries Victorians themselves so busily constructed between the outside and the inside of the self, between English and other, between classes, and between public and private spheres, but it sometimes seems we spend nearly as much time examining and reconfiguring the borders and boundaries that define our own discipline and its objects of study. Some recent work in this second category include discussions of whether the "Victorian era" really makes sense as a coherent temporal framework (Richard Price, Martin Hewitt), whether work in nineteenth century print culture can ever make sense in a purely national context (Amanda Claybaugh), and whether the interdisciplinary history of Victorian Studies still makes sense for scholarly practice today (see Joanne Shattock's recent article in *Literature Compass* for a good overview of recent publications on this and related topics). Interrogation of the boundaries of "Victorian

Studies” have not been limited to scholarly work, but include institutional change, as in Indiana University’s recent announcement that they are reorganizing their Victorian Studies program as a Nineteenth-Century Studies Center . So what remains of “Victorian Studies” as a recognizable formation in the wake of recent challenges to (and defenses of) the chronological, geographical, methodological, and disciplinary borders of both our field and the era from which it takes its name?

In a recent forum on “Victorian Studies and Interdisciplinarity” in *Victorian Review* , Nancy Armstrong suggests that her own solution to the problem of methodological and disciplinary coherence lies in literary scholarship’s appropriation of Foucault’s concept of discourse, which “transforms the material of cultural history into the subject matter of literary analysis” (11). She therefore solves the “problem” of interdisciplinarity by reading a wide range of cultural texts (from fields as diverse as literature, political economy, history, medicine) in a discipline-specific way. While as a literature person myself I find this suggestion an attractive solution to the sometimes overwhelming expanse of approaches and materials Victorian studies offers, I do want to ask whether the interpretation of Foucault upon which it relies might encode a certain way of thinking about boundaries and borders that has influenced our interpretation of Victorian culture more than we have perhaps acknowledged. If, as Armstrong points out, Foucault’s work claims that “the Victorian period, like our own, put most of its cultural energy into creating deviants and demons to discover,” might our own repeated discovery of this very pattern deserve renewed scrutiny (12)? Might there be an approach to the interpretation of Victorian culture that does not emphasize the production of boundaries so heavily, a version that might allow us to interpret Victorian culture without having to first locate its boundaries and borderlines only to then apply a hermeneutically suspicious reading technique that excavates the conditions and motivations according to which such boundaries were produced? (Might, in fact, there even be a new interpretation of Foucault’s work that could help us do this?) For me, some promising new developments and approaches include Eve Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*, which, while not Victorian in topic, clearly registers Sedgwick’s past work in our field when it calls for a departure from the models of reading I described above. And new work like Sharon Marcus’s recent *Between Women* – in which she offers us a model of “just reading” to replace the protocols of hermeneutically suspicious reading – seem to me to offer a future for our field that we might think of as Victorian Studies without borders.

### **Citations/Further Reading**

Armstrong, Nancy . “Professing Disciplinarily.” *Victorian Review* 33:1 (2007): 11-14.

Claybaugh, Amanda. “ Toward a New Transatlanticism: Dickens in the United States.” *Victorian Studies* 48:3 (2006): 439-460.

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Price, Richard. *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1999 .

Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2003.

Shattock, Joanne. “Where Next in Victorian Literary Studies? – Revising the Canon, Extending Cultural Boundaries, and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity.” *Literature Compass* 4:4 (2007): 1280-1291.

### Victorian Boundary Experiments

#### Grace Kehler, McMaster University

The compression and even annihilation of temporal and spatial boundaries in the nineteenth century due to the technological revolution has acquired axiomatic status. Various steam powered technologies including the printing press, the railroad, and factory machines accelerated the overall pace of communication, travel, and work, shifting the contours of the known, knowable world. If, as Raymond Williams cautions, industrialization and its close cognates of urbanization and capitalist individualism actually belong to a history of change that significantly predates the nineteenth century (*The Country and the City* 96-103), nonetheless the techno-industrial revolution left its mark on every aspect of Victorian culture and materiality (*Culture and Society* xvi, 26). From the nineteenth century onwards, there has been no lack of incisive criticism of such developments and the indelible marks they left on the human body as well as on the earth. Yet, however damaging, industrialism tends to evoke intense responses – both negative and positive – that accord at least a measure of homage to the possibilities of human invention: invention that at points runs amuck, granted, but still an impressive force of creation-destruction. Correlating such material innovations with the conceptual and formal experiments in Victorian literature, recent critics offer *tour de force* arguments that continue to push at the boundaries of Victorian studies, much like industry reordered the Victorian world. Yopie Prins, for example, lends distinction to Victorian prosody, identifying a typically overlooked poetic device such as metre as a seminal form of history that mediates and, indeed, creates culture, “preceding and perhaps even predicting the sound reproduction technologies that emerged in the course of the nineteenth century” (44). In such readings, the imaginative and the artistic emerge not in spite of but in dynamic interrelation with material-industrial creations.

Yet what do we make of the surprising number of artists in the last three decades of the nineteenth century who produced highly experimental work and who advocated or ultimately embraced at least one traditional temporal-spatial conception – that is, belief in a metaphysical realm that informs the temporal and concrete? Gerard Manley Hopkins was but one of a number of mid- to late Victorian aesthetes or decadents whose compositions restlessly pushed past the familiar into linguistic, structural, and perceptual experimentation and who, in adulthood, converted to Roman Catholicism. Other artist-converts include

Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Lionel Johnson, and Ernest Dowson. While their arts differ widely and by no means represent the whole of the aesthetic and decadent movements (see Schaffer's *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*), they accurately represent the widespread impetus to endow culture with a rich, progressive openness to the previously undervalued or tabooed. In part, this endeavour entailed dissolving the traditional, hierarchical evaluations of binaries, in which the popular was subordinate to high art, performativity to identity, or sensation to cognition (Beckson 33-39; Dowling 82-86; Denisoff 6). While the aesthetic innovations of near death-bed converts such as Beardsley and Wilde obviously require different treatment from those of the Jesuit Hopkins, whose poetics and faith co-evolved, I want to suggest briefly the ways in which a belief in metaphysics – a belief in an infinite, absolute being – might work in concert with aesthetic and conceptual boundary transgression.

A number of the aesthetes and decadents repeatedly employed irony and paradox, devices that enabled them to affirm logical antitheses. Hopkins' "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection" explores the simultaneity of creation and destruction in the natural world, locating in its unpredictable vitality intimations of a metaphysical (state of) inclusiveness in which all forces and entities possess equal value. Secular aesthetes who converted to Catholicism later in life also composed work that sustained thematic and formal tensions between creation and destruction; a favoured mode comprised an appeal to authority while playfully distorting or reworking the conventional to the point that their meanings became ambiguous (Beckson 51; Dowling 84). In numerous works, the rituals of the Catholic church in particular serve as a prime site of a character's voluptuous enjoyments. Sin-sated characters – epitomized by Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* – become epicures of the emotions, indulging in repentance as one among many exquisite sensations and treating the Christian promise of transformation as a delectable, transient state. As in the case of the devout Hopkins, however, secular artists transgressed boundaries in an attempt to communicate the insufficiency of the temporal, the singular, or the dogmatic, their equivocal art striving not to resolve but to engage the problems of perception (Gagnier 3). Such artistic reaching may well have spurred on Victorian artists, whose lives and compositions possessed the ability to titillate and sometimes shock, to embrace Catholicism. The conversions of a number of paradoxical, ironic artists potentially continues what they began in their transgressive aesthetics: the sustaining of rationally and culturally designated oppositions, this time thoughtful skepticism and faith. The metaphysical with its promise of the eternal and the capacious provides an alternate system of making meaning, in which the very concepts of duality and contradiction cease to exist. Spiritual conversion following a lifetime of creating paradoxical art may indicate a radical embrasure of the Other as generative of perceptual openness to that which lies beyond human and worldly borders.

## **Works Cited**

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Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* . Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986.

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Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* . Charlottesville : U of Virginia P, 2000.

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—. *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* . 1958. New York : Columbia UP, 1983.

**CFP for the VSAO Panel at ACCUTE,  
June 2008**

***The Victorians and Language***

*"Language is called the Garment of Thought: however, it should rather be, Language is the Flesh-Garment, the Body of Thought.... Some styles are lean, adust, wiry, the muscle itself seems osseus; some are even quite pallid, hunger-bitten, and dead-looking; while others again glow in the flush of health and vigorous self-growth, sometimes (as in my own case) not without an apoplectic tendency. Moreover, there are sham Metaphors, which overhanging that same Thought's-Body (best naked), and deceptively bedizening, or bolstering it out, may be called its false stuffings, superfluous show-cloaks, and tawdry woollen rags: whereof he that runs and reads may gather whole hampers, — and burn them."*

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

Even as the languages that one might weave or wear proliferated in the period, Victorian writers worried about the uses and power of language, for truth or falsehood, for subversion or aggression, for concealment or revelation, and not least about the challenges of communication as languages splintered across class, gender, race, religion, and profession. This panel of the Victorian Studies Association of Ontario encourages proposals that consider issues of and around language in the Victorian period. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:



- linguistics
- languages of science
- language and the professions
- language as power—dictionaries and grammars
- lost, dead, or dying languages
- language and nation
- translation
- literary languages (critical, poetic, novelistic)
- dialects; languages of region, race, or class
- symbolic languages (e.g. language of flowers), encryption, codes
- body language
- language and gender
- archaism and eclecticism
- philosophies of language

Please send electronic copies of proposals (300-500 words), plus a 100-word abstract and brief biographical statement, to Christine Bolus-Reichert ( [bolus@utsc.utoronto.ca](mailto:bolus@utsc.utoronto.ca) ) by **November 15, 2007** . Alternatively, hard copies can be sent by mail to: **Christine Bolus-Reichert, Department of Humanities, University of Toronto , Scarborough 1265 Military Trail, Toronto , ON M1C 1A4 .**

### **Call for Papers: Northeast Victorian Studies Association**

**NVSA 2008 Victorian Underworlds  
University of Toronto: April 11-13, 2008**

*A sail / That brings our friends up from the underworld*  
– Tennyson, “Tears, Idle Tears,” 1847.

NVSA solicits submissions for its annual conference; the topic this year is Victorian Underworlds.

They opened popular museums of geology. They dug vast sewer systems and subways and excavated archeological sites around the world. They imagined new regions deep within the earth and developed new methods for peering into the lower strata of their social hierarchies and the depths of the physical body, places where desire and disease were thought to develop. The human mind, the deepest oceans, and hell itself were just some of the nether regions re-imagined throughout the Victorian period.

This year’s conference seeks not to catalogue the many underworlds of the Victorians, but to understand why the very idea of the underworld was such a powerful concept during the Victorian era. Why were the Victorians so eager to peer beneath the surface of what was known or acknowledged? Why did they keep finding there not merely depths, but articulated worlds? Are there basic similarities among these many underworlds, or do they differ from

one another in important ways? The conference is also interested in mining our own scholarly practices: what underworlds do we look for?

### **SOCIAL UNDERWORLDS/ POLITICAL UNDERWORLDS**

- \* Beneath the public sphere: the worlds of the poor; the criminal; the insurgent
- \* Colonial underworlds
- \* Below stairs: the world of servants quarters
- \* Fallen women
- \* Conspiracies
- \* Bureaucracies
- \* Hierarchies of alterity (the sub in subordination)
- \* Victorian bases/Victorian superstructures
- \* Transgression and its discontents: the virtues or vices of (studying) the abject and subaltern

### **CULTURAL UNDERWORLDS**

- \* Demi-mondes and sub-cultures
- \* Communities of losers and wastrels
- \* Anti-heroes
- \* Secret societies or groups
- \* Beggars and beggar-kings
- \* Orchestra pits
- \* Underwords: secret languages; thieves' cant; soldiers' slang; Cockney
- \* The underneath in art: pentimento; undercoats; bohemia

### **PHYSICAL UNDERWORLDS**

- \* Under where? Under what?
- \* Burial of the body
- \* The sewer system as world
- \* The Underground
- \* Transatlantic cable
- \* Urban design for the under classes
- \* Archeologists
- \* Geological underworlds: strata; fossils; volcanic eruptions; caves
- \* "Dreadful hollows": mines; tunnels; secret passages; dungeons
- \* Deep waters: undersea excavation and building; charting; exploration; below decks; fishing; submariners
- \* Fantastic antipodes

### **SURFACE AND DEPTH/INVISIBLE WORLDS**

- \* The mind as world/the brain as world
- \* Paranoid worlds
- \* Mediums and seances
- \* Lingerie and dress reform
- \* Pornography

- \* The body as underworld: circulation; germs/microbes; sexuality
- \* The Fiery Pit: Orphic & Eurydicean; Persephonic & Demetrian; Victorian Satans
- \* Creatures of the underworld: Mermen; sirens; Kraken; dwarves; gnomes; Morlocks; vampires; and others
- \* Delirious depths: from wine-cellars to Venusberg

The conference will feature a presentation on magic lanterns, as well as visits to the special collections of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto and a distinguished keynote panel.

Proposals (no more than two double-spaced pages) by Oct. 15, 2007 (e-mail submissions strongly encouraged):

**Professor Amanda Claybaugh, e-mail:  
Chair, NVSA Program Committee  
English Department  
Harvard University  
Barker Center  
12 Quincy Street  
Cambridge , MA 02138**

Please note all submissions to NVSA are evaluated anonymously. Successful submissions will make a compelling case for the talk and its relation to the conference topic. Please do not send complete papers, and do not include your name on your proposal. Please do include your name, institutional and email addresses, and proposal title in a cover letter. Papers should take 15 minutes (20 minutes maximum) so as to provide ample time for discussion.

The Coral Lansbury Travel Grant (\$100.00) and George Ford Travel Grant (\$100.00), given in memory of key founding members of NVSA, are awarded annually to the graduate student, adjunct instructor, or independent scholar who must travel the greatest distance to give a paper at our conference. Apply by indicating in your cover letter that you wish to be considered (and mention if you have other sources of funding).

Jonah Siegel, President, NVSA  
Department of English, Rutgers University, New Brunswick , NJ 08901 , USA  
phone: (732) 932-7679  
fax: (732) 932-1150